

Memorial Tribute: Edward J. Jurji (1907-1990)

Edward J. Jurji came to America from his native Syria in 1933 and spent most of the rest of his long life with us in Princeton, but not at first at the seminary. That came later. He turned the usual postgraduate academic ladder on its head: first a Ph.D. "across the street" at the university, ^{followed by} then a prestigious research membership at the Institute for Advanced Study, and only then, six years after receiving his doctorate, did he earn the seminary's Bachelor of Theology degree, the equivalent of today's Master of Divinity.

He was my classmate, ~~in~~ the Class of '42. The rest of us stood in some awe of this man who had just been with Einstein, as it were, at the Institute, and who had already written a book published by the Princeton University Press on Illumination in Islamic Mysticism. But "Ed" Jurji was our friend at once, a gentle scholar and brilliant translator, proud of his own Arabic heritage, yet a Christian who knew so much about so many religions that we listened when he told us why he was a Christian.

Dr. Jurji was born in Latakia, Syria, on March 27, 1907, into a Christian family well-known for its contributions to education. He died in Monroe Village, NJ, on July 9, 1990 at the age of 83. For five years after graduating from the American University of Beirut he taught in Iraq, first for the Iraqi Department of Education and then at the American Boys School in

Baghdad. A year before coming to America he married Nahia K. Khouri whose family was also prominent in education.

Jurji had been accepted for doctoral study under Albright at Johns Hopkins, but on his way he stopped in Princeton, and Philip Hitti, then the best known Arabist in America, recognizing talent, persuaded him to stay for ^{here} work ^{a doctorate at Princeton's} at the university. ^{AggM being on then to the} ~~At the~~ Institute, as he worked his way into the field of comparative religion, as it was then called, Dr. Mackay convinced him that he should balance his religious studies with deeper grounding in the theology of his own Christian faith, and brought him to the seminary. From the very beginning he was both student and teacher, rising rapidly from the rank of instructor while still in the junior class, to lecturer and assistant professor in the history department after graduation. In 1946 he was promoted to associate professor in Islamics and Comparative Religion, and in 1954 was named Professor, persuading the seminary to change the name of the chair from Comparative Religions to History of ^{Religions}. He held that position with distinction for the next twenty-three years until retirement as emeritus professor in 1977. On the side he lectured at the university, and for thirty-two years he was Book Review Editor for the Princeton Seminary Bulletin.

Nahia Jurji died in 1957. A year later Dr. Jurji married Ruth Guinter, daughter of missionary parents, and assistant professor of nursing at Columbia University, who had herself served briefly as a supervisor in nursing at the American University in Beirut.

One of Dr. Jurji's earliest works was the three-volume Tarikh al-Arab, a translation into Arabic of Philip Hitti's History of the Arabs, on the English original of which he had worked with his mentor. Dr. Jurji's other major works include The Christian Interpretation of Religion, and The Middle East: Its Religion and Culture. His own favorite was The Phenomenology of Religion which embodied his most distinctive contribution to the field of religious studies, and he is perhaps most widely known as editor of the best-selling The Great Religions of the Modern World.

For all his devotion to the study of other religions, as in his Religious Pluralism and World Community, Dr. Jurji's heart and mind belonged to Christ and his kingdom. He was ordained by New Brunswick Presbytery in 1942, and faithfully served interim pastorates in Christ Church, Trenton, and the Hopewell Presbyterian Church in the 1940s. His lifelong mission was to his own people in what was then called the Syrian Protestant Church in Brooklyn, but which under his leadership built a new sanctuary and became the Fourth Avenue Presbyterian Church.

He often summarized his ~~own~~ mixture of admiration, attraction and separation from the world religions, as "reverence for the reverence of others", and as a search for "unity in diversity". He was a totally committed Christian who could yet write, "India might well teach us the tolerance and gentleness of a mature mind.." And despite immense respect for the mystic element in Islam, and for India's Hindu philosophers, his was a tradition of steadfast Christian faith in a Muslim sea; and of

popular Hinduism he wrote, "[It] is a peculiar syncretism won at the cost of philosophical consistency and religious certitude. A religion uncertain whether a personal God is ultimate will drift into obscurantism." ("The Phenomenon of Hinduism"). He opposed the kind of religious confrontation that attacks without love and understanding, but he made clear in his classes that there is a crucial difference between God's revelation in Jesus Christ and the religions of the world.

One final story should be added. It is only a family anecdote, and I don't have it first-hand, but it says much about Christian living in a religiously diverse community. The Jurji's home for years was on Mercer Street, and it is said that their daughter Layla was having trouble with her arithmetic, third grade arithmetic, I think. Time after time she came home with C's. But one day she turned up with an A, and her father beamed. "That's much better; but how did you do it?" "Well," she said, "you know that nice old man who lives across the street. He's been helping me. He likes mama's cookies, and my teacher likes his arithmetic."

The Jurjis and the Einsteins, good neighbors on Mercer Street, Arab and Jew. They could teach the whole world a lesson. And because we stand with our colleague Edward Jurji in a great tradition and like him possessing an even greater hope, we praise God with thanksgiving for the memory of His servant, Edward.

- Samuel Hugh Moffett
Princeton. Oct. 17, 1990